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A Life's Work

BLAIR CLARK

MAVERICK: Fifty Years of Investigative Reporting. *By Fred J. Cook. G.P. Putnam's Sons. 320 pp. $18.95.*

Fred Cook begins his memoir, *Maverick*, by saying that as he looks back from "the age of elderly astonishment," he is "amazed at how I got so far so fast." That line might come better from the heir of a Sulzberger, Pulitzer, Graham or Luce, for Cook's extraordinary career and accomplishments came slowly and painfully.

He edged into the business of writing his splendid exposés of high-level chicanery, corruption and repression while he was still laboring as a rewrite man on the undistinguished *New York World-Telegram and Sun*. Many readers of *The Nation* are old enough to remember that it was Carey McWilliams who first discovered Cook's unused talent, encouraged him to develop it and published the results. McWilliams would never have claimed that he "made" Fred Cook. Cook created himself as a great investigative journalist and as the author of forty-two books. And he didn't begin this career as a journalist and author until he had put in fifteen years on the *World-Telegram*. But his connection with *The Nation* stimulated his efforts and enriched his reporting.

It is hard not to grow sentimental about the life behind the work as one reads these unadorned pages. Cook had so few advantages—no well-placed relatives, fancy education or friends to help him up the ladder. His father was a department manager in a small-town hardware store on the Jersey shore, his mother a schoolteacher. Cook turned 21 in the deep depression year of 1932; life had to be led frugally.

Nevertheless he grew up in [illegible] calls "one of the most blissful homes a boy was ever reared in." His parents were supportive, devoted and determined to help him along the way even when he decided at the age of 15 to be, of all things, a writer. His father was not shocked: he himself had only a sixth-grade education, but he had plowed through the encyclopedia and was the town tax collector. He would have gone into this kind of profession if he had had even the modest advantages that helped his son along.

Cook's early years on a small New Jersey daily led to a short stint as editor of an embattled weekly which jousted with crooked local bosses and their moneyed allies. He learned to distrust and dislike the rich and powerful but he still believed that an independent press could keep those types sufficiently in check for the system to work well. At the age of 33 he got a chance to go to the big city, to Roy Howard's *World-Telegram*.

It was from this confinement that he broke loose into the pages of *The Nation*, "pretty well disenchanted with the distortions" of the *World-Telegram*, he writes, and certain that writing for *The Nation* would not advance his career with Howard. Not having read *The Nation* for years, he nevertheless jumped at the chance to write stories he otherwise could not have got into print. There began a long series of articles in this magazine, starting in 1958 with the debunking of the myth of Boris Morros, Soviet spy turned American patriot and witch hunter.

Cook writes that "Carey McWilliams was my kind of man," by which he means much more than just another iconoclast. What Cook admired in the editor was his industry, his capacity to see the connections between events and, above all, his fierce hatred of all kinds of injustice. Their close relationship survived McWilliams's disagreement with Cook's conviction that the Warren commission had not got to the conspiratorial bottom of the Kennedy assassination.

[illegible] the Central Intelligence Agency; the first of their kind, Cook accepted McWilliams's stricture that his reports were to be based entirely on the written record, with absolutely no interviewing of his own. (McWilliams was a firm believer in the solidity of the written record as against spoken words, and he also thought, understandably, that he should not put the survival of his underfunded magazine at risk.)

Many of those articles, fruits of the collaboration between McWilliams and Cook, were turned into books which had much more influence than their sales figures would suggest. There were, among others, *The Unfinished Story of Alger Hiss*, *The Warfare State*, *The FBI Nobody Knows*, *The Corrupted Land*, *The Secret Rulers*, *The Nightmare Decade* and *The Great Energy Scam: Private Billions vs. Public Good*.

After all this labor, and twenty-five years after he quit his last salaried newspaper job to struggle as a freelancer, Fred Cook is still productive (his account of his own surveillance by the F.B.I. will appear soon in *The Nation*). Scholars with years to spend studying this period in libraries may chip away at the rough blocks of facts Cook assembled in the midst of the fray, but the monument of a life's work as an investigative reporter remains for anyone to see and admire.

One of Cook's successors in this art, Robert Caro, author of the stunning work *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, and of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, pays extraordinary tribute to him in the Moses book. He sees Cook as the central figure in the small group of New York newspaper reporters whose collaboration (behind the backs of their bosses) on the story of Moses's corruption forced it onto the front pages of all the city's newspapers—even, at last, of *The New York Times*.

In those days, Caro says, Cook was "the quintessential rewriteman, so accustomed to seeing the world through the earpiece of a telephone headset and notes taken by other men that he felt no

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